

## Mediocrity, at Work and in Jest

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### Abstract

Departing from different contexts' understanding of mediocrity as "average" or, by contrast, "below average", this essay goes on to consider some aspects of the ethical and political challenges posed by the fact that mediocrity, quite simply and independently of its definition, exists. Among those challenges are difficulties posed when making distinctions between discernment and mediocrity in the other and in oneself, together with the problem of accepting that there is a duty of consideration toward those who are mediocre. The nature of those challenges is explored through attention to the work of Alexander Pope, George Eliot and Hannah Arendt, with references to Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Mediocrity and Delusion* (1988) playing a particularly important role in the analysis. The article concludes with a series of reflections on the strange affinities between mediocrity and its opposites.

**Keywords:** *mediocrity, average, Enzensberger, Pope, Arendt, George Eliot*

Emma West's essay in this special issue of *Word and Text* is an incisive exploration of mediocrity's congruence with the middling at its most anonymous, unremarkable and undiscerning. There are two points that this essay departs from in relation to that. Firstly, it is worth noting that in other cultures (West's survey excellently charts representations of the theme in *British* contexts) mediocrity does not suggest the *average* as much as the *incompetent* (Francesco Marroni's reflections in his interview in these pages attest to that, as does the "Dialogues" section collated by Arleen Ionescu for this issue, following her interviews with eminent scholars and academics in Romania). In such contexts the tone of the encounter with the mediocre can be one of weary resignation, for how else are the mediocre to be faced, if one is to be gracious? Or it can be one of spluttering expostulation over the pass that things have come to, for what else (and more) do the mediocre deserve? What is vented there is the desperately frustrated reaction to the shiftlessness of a culture of acceptance of the mediocre, with the mediocre understood as bearing upon the designation of incapability. The intensity of the reaction occurs because it begins to seem that the mediocre has become systemic, and if it is systemic it must be because the mediocre is buttressed by the reluctance to restrict its sway or resist it outright. In other words, the entrenchment and countenancing of the mediocre by those presumed to know better, as well as by those who cannot know better and never will, abets and *de facto* covers for ineptitude. The consequence is that those who are mediocre can participate more freely – whether deliberately or otherwise – in a self-serving commonwealth of the inexpert. It also follows that members in that kind of commonwealth do not recognize themselves for what they are. If they do, they will tend not to brook any identification of their worth or lack of it. Among those others prone to spluttering expostulation this leads, not surprisingly, to a situation where defeatism and cynicism set in about the prospect for

the vaunted “quality leaps” that might counteract the mediocre. Possibly the cynicism arises because the language of quality leaps, as we know, is close to the rhetoric of politicians. Public relations executives and the massed ranks of “standards officers” and “standards auditors”, pitched up under various banners of excellence, also bandy it about. Those banners always wave bravely, of course. More than that, they herald “improvement”: that stirring word and idea. But in all our yesterdays, todays and tomorrows proclaiming improvement, what quite often emerges (though not always) is not “quality” itself (however we define it), but a quality-administering bureaucracy that prompts disaffiliation in its regard or an outright flight away from it by those who, under different circumstances and if allowed their head, might in fact have delivered the quality required. Once this negativity and cynicism set in about the ineradicable nature of mediocrity (for the process of dealing with mediocrity can itself become indistinguishable from it), reform and change become very difficult. In those circumstances only very painfully – if at all – can reform, change and “improvement” come about. And the situation, which is already intractable enough in cases where the mediocre are monitored by the excellent, will be complicated further in cases where the excellent are instead monitored by the mediocre. What happens there is that mediocrity becomes political – or, one could say, becomes even more political. For the question of mediocrity is always and ineluctably political.

This leads to the second point I’d like to flag. The politics of the mediocre turns on the question of discernment, as already hinted. But who is it that will be allowed to be discerning, to exercise discernment, to be perceived as discerning? That is a curious and vexing question indeed, for paradoxically it cannot be answered with any rectitude unless one does not somehow presume (if not know) oneself to be discerning. To discern the mediocre requires me, ideally, to not be mediocre myself. However, since I cannot be entirely sure that I am not mediocre, mediocrity may find itself sustained by my very effort to expose it and counter it. There is a further twist to this. *Assuming* I am not mediocre, and if I do not call the mediocre to order or to greater effort or to see itself as it really is, then I am colluding with the mediocre and *thereupon* becoming mediocre myself, collaborating with mediocrity’s effects by not prompting it away from its comfort zone. Through that very act I negatively transform such distinction as I might have into mediocrity by association, accommodation, tolerance. To be sure, that all spells a difficult and perhaps impossible challenge. For the point of mediocrity’s comfort zone is not so much its comfort as its genius – since there *is* a genius in mediocrity, of a sort – for turning its existence into a space without consequences to itself: a space which can be beguiling to others, drawing them in despite themselves because life can after all be easier that way. Why, indeed, worry about the mediocre or at the mediocre, when mediocrity’s life lesson is to not worry about its own predicament, which it perceives as normality? Others can worry, will worry; mediocrity wouldn’t – and won’t. Meanwhile crassness, as a corollary of the mediocre which does not have much sense of nicety and nuance over its own operation, and which will not fret about the chatter, as it will tend to perceive it, around the protocols of good and better practice or peer opinion and peer review (especially if it has itself instituted the conditions that prejudice those safeguards), will always have recourse to the populist retort that helps it to shore up its own position. “Who are you to call me, or anybody, or anything else, ‘mediocre’?” Against that querulousness, any invocation of quality, rigour, standards, taste, discernment will only come across as exacting, pedantic, overfastidious, inegalitarian, elitist. It is one reason among many why the mediocre will

always be with us. Nor is it at all clear, while mediocrity lasts, that its sphere of action will contract. If anything, it will do quite the opposite, for mediocrity is nothing if not self-reproducing. The commonwealth of the inexpert alluded to above will tend to see to that, as will individual complacency about running *also* rather than running *ahead*.

What should follow at this point in my argument is probably (i) a catalogue of examples from culture, literature, history and contemporary political practices of the mediocre understood in the light (or darkness) of ineptitude, rather than in the key of the average, and (ii) examples of what can occur when the bluff of the mediocre is not called and when it is, in fact, indulged to the point where mediocrity's self-reproduction becomes systemic and even monumentalized in professional environments and in political and popular culture. If I skim over that requirement it is not, I hope, out of drifting to being *mediocre about the mediocre*. (As an aside, it ought to be said that this is a frightening prospect indeed, though what is quickly realized through the tag "mediocre about the mediocre" is that it is in fact a cruel yet accurate alternative definition of the mediocre. That is because mediocrity could not be self-reproducing if it applied any level of quality to itself, such that perversely the excellence of its operation and its effect hangs on its capacity to doggedly and cannily maintain its solidarity with itself.) So, away from the parenthesis: if I skim over what was hinted at, it is because I suspect that readers can very readily supply examples from their own experience. In any case, instances and practices of the mediocre are amply analyzed in other essays in this issue, which provides diverse taxonomies and scrutiny of mediocrity, together with very full genealogies of evolving concepts and conceptions of it. Instead I shall follow a different route for analysis. My interest is in what it is that is at work when writing about the mediocre. For it can be surmised that the experience from which that springs is too irritating, too raw, too frustration-laden to make the act of writing about mediocrity personally bearable. There can be various reasons for that. I shall mention only two, both of which are, I think, overtaken by some degree of poignancy.

The first reason emerges from the recognition that one is, oneself, mediocre: if not generally so, then in certain spheres of one's life. That leads to discomfiture about proceeding to a critique of the mediocre that, seemly and honest though the reflexivity is, needles thought and analysis and urges them to recall that they are very probably themselves not exceptional. This (self)-awareness renders the second factor – concerning the perceived mediocrity of the other – complicated. For there is, objectively speaking and indeed for the sake of objectivity itself, a pressing need for the mediocre to be exposed, even if that leads to rejoinders and reactions predicated on *tu quoque* positions. The reason is that mediocrity, when it is understood in the key of incompetence, is corrosive. It can make everyday existence in public and professional circles tired, tawdry and meretricious rather than meritocratic. So the mediocre calls for contrastive action.

One goad to that contrastive action is reflection. Reflection on the mediocre can set in motion a ready repertoire of reactions, from which apparently viable strategies against mediocrity could possibly emerge. Reflection on mediocrity might start by thinking of itself as an oblique tribute to those stifled by the second-rate who see no way to the ushering in of the first-rate, as well as to those who have lived and continue to live in contexts and cultures where, for instance, jobsworths and sycophants reign over those who, objectively speaking (and to suppress here, for a moment, the difficulty of objectivity), are more competent than they are. But what perhaps ought to come into play there as well – and this is another part of the repertoire – is consideration of the

ethics and responsibility *to the mediocre themselves*, for they too exist, after all (oh, how they exist!). And in the process one becomes aware of just how difficult contending with mediocrity is, and how difficult contrastive action will be. As will be seen in the next section, aspects of all that feature in Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *Mediocrity and Delusion* and Pope's *Dunciad*<sup>1</sup>. For mediocrity always instigates, in the end, a displaced reflection on the human condition. It is always balanced on the invidiousness of, on the one hand, berating those who can only ever be themselves and, on the other, discerning those who can be helped to become a little more than they already are and who can be prompted not to accept the pedestrian and to agitate against it. It bears on the insistence on the priorities of exclusiveness, excellence and the exceptional by the elect, as it were, so that it is potentially about rightist politics at its best and its worst. But it also bears on the insistence on protecting, promoting, preserving the interests of those who do not quite measure up (who, when all is said and done, equates to all of us) and on giving them their chance, thereby potentially tending towards the best and worst of leftist politics. This is why in what follows some brief references to George Eliot and Hannah Arendt will also be necessary.

Pope, Eliot, Arendt, Enzensberger it will be, then. Though unequal attention will be given to these four (Enzensberger will draw the most extended commentary while the others are more concisely referred to), there are telling patterns to encounter there and – to echo my title – plenty of attention to mediocrity at work and in jest.

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Let me start not chronologically, but with Enzensberger. The concluding and banner essay to the collection *Mediocrity and Delusion*, originally published 25 years ago (a neat and round anniversary figure) and called “Mediocrity and Delusion: A Conciliatory Proposal”, provides an intriguing historical perspective, for it is a report on mediocrity in “the Federal Republic of Germany” – the term Enzensberger repeatedly uses – before the fall of the Berlin Wall a year later. It therefore provides this special issue with another quite specific country-based focus for its reflections on mediocrity, after the ones relating to Romanian, British and Italian contexts elsewhere, and does so at a time just before the world became post-contemporary to the postmodern, as it were. Enzensberger's two epigraphs, one from Joachim Heinrich Campe on ancient understanding of the mediocre as congruent with “the right measure” and the other expressing a related sentiment by Herder about mediocrity being synonymous with “a happy temperament of gifts and skills ... which does not raise itself to geniuses and philosophers and does not sink down to dull village wretches”, being rather “a middling magnitude which fairly strikes the point of usefulness”, recall the “golden mean” perception of the mediocre rather than the perception of it as prosaic or inexperienced. It is why the first line of the essay proper, “We don't think much of ourselves,” resonates as it does while immediately suggesting that the conciliation in question will be with both

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<sup>1</sup> Note to the uninformed reader who may or may not be mediocre: it is perfectly possible, with all the affordances at our disposal these days, to read up on background to Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Consequently, I can perhaps be allowed to move on and provide very little of that, depending on the reader to fill in what may be required. The reader may in fact consider this as a performative aspect of this essay's title, ‘Mediocrity, at Work and In Jest’, and is perfectly at liberty to decide whether the mediocrity of the move, if it is seen in that light, is meant in jest or exemplifies a mediocrity that cannot help itself. The move, incidentally, is arguably kin to some of the effects of Enzensberger's own writing and therefore it serves as background in any case, albeit of a different kind.

an individual and a generalized lack of distinction – and with their dangers.<sup>2</sup> “The Germans have blown up their history all by themselves,”<sup>3</sup> Enzensberger remarks, hinting that this might have been overdetermined by reactions to the pull and promise of exceptionalism. He then suggests that the nation has been happy to accommodate itself to *Das Mittelmaß*, as Campe had it, living a “*self-refuting prophecy*”<sup>4</sup> about the worries of the Right in respect to the tradition of *Gesellschaftskritik*, as indicated by “the non-appearance of the threatened collapse into anarchy and chaos” and by the fact that “the Republic doesn’t listen [but] stoically submits to the linguistic garbage of the “intellectual and moral shift” while weathering talk about “the decay of values, ... moral decline, ... philistines, the destruction of culture”<sup>5</sup>. The Left pontificates equally, in its case about “the working masses [being] transformed into a horde of consumer idiots”<sup>6</sup>. Enzensberger then makes a clearly crucial point about “the babble of interpreters” of this state of mediocrity:

These dogmas, no matter by whom they are delivered, suffer however from one serious failing: the individuals whose abolition they are so concerned about don’t pay any attention. Dull as it is the silent majority continues to imagine that the people of whom it consists, and indeed each one for himself, are at any time themselves. They simply refuse to believe that they have changed into zombies, puppets, phantoms and it doesn’t even occur to them to confuse their reality with a “simulation”.<sup>7</sup>

That final dig at Baudrillard is interesting. However in this context it is not as important as Enzensberger’s understanding of the canniness and native *wisdom* of the putatively mediocre in disregarding excoriation of who they are and how they carry on. Acknowledging that “[a]nyone who preaches disaster usually wants to be proved right”, and that “[i]f reality declines to honour their predictions they then experience that as a narcissistic hurt”<sup>8</sup>, he acknowledges also that “the Federal Republic” is in fact registering a “success” that places anyone who would be one of the “social prophets” in “an odd dilemma”, for “the longer this community prospers the more he loses credibility, and that not only with the dull-witted masses, but with himself”<sup>9</sup>. Mediocrity at work – indeed, and doing well. One can sense that the jest, for Enzensberger, is on those who find this a “disagreeable situation”, who find that the conclusion that “*This society is mediocre*” and “characterized by the uncontested hegemony of the *middle class*”<sup>10</sup> has led, in fact, to the vindication of the truth in the epigraphs by Campe and Herder. The exceptional, it would seem, is not desired, and perhaps it is not desirable either. The lesson of history has in fact shown why the unexceptional might, precisely, be better:

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<sup>2</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, trans. Martin Chalmers (London: Verso, 1992), 167.

<sup>3</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 168.

<sup>4</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 169, emphasis in the original.

<sup>5</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 168-169.

<sup>6</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 170.

<sup>7</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 171.

<sup>8</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 173.

<sup>9</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 173-174.

<sup>10</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 174, emphasis in the original.

Our country has involuntarily, but abruptly, discarded its political traditions. The famous “overcoming the past” was, as is well known, not a moral but a purely pragmatic act, and as such it has succeeded beyond all expectations. Almost overnight, a whole nation discarded its imperial ambitions abroad, and its favourite habits at home like belief in authority, drill, blind obedience. The drawing of this conclusion from the greatest debacle in their history did not come easily to all Germans. It was a painful but altogether successful learning process. It produced solid results precisely because its motives were of a quite opportunistic nature. The Republic’s middle way has proved, at least in the meantime, to be an altogether golden mean.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of history we understand what is being said, of course. Beyond that, as Enzensberger sees it, this is a political project where mediocrity – in the sense of the middling as value, as golden mean – is a mediocre objective for mediocre reasons – to keep with that sense – and the result is an unqualified success that *is* seen as success. In jest and in remembrance of stereotypes it could almost be said that the Germans have been their typical efficient selves in the realization of their own best mediocrity. Exemplarily so, in fact. They are not driven any more by the exceptional:

The majority of the population no longer wants to know anything about political adventures, it rejects any kind of ideological fanaticism, utopias of every kind and totalizing dreams are deeply suspect to it. No excessiveness please! We’ve all seen where that leads ...<sup>12</sup>

The Germans have instead become exceptional in making mediocrity successful. In the process, they have upheld one traditional stance before the mediocre and undermined another. The latter is the one wherein

[c]ritical minds like to pronounce *mediocre* with a note of bitterness, as if it represents the final stage of damnation. By comparison, prefixes like *detestable*, *disastrous*, *shocking* almost seem like a distinction. There is absolutely nothing worse than mediocrity. No judgment is more contemptible<sup>13</sup>.

That judgment would be a familiar stance in English literature, recognizable from Dryden through to Pope, from Arnold’s *Culture and Anarchy* to the Eliot of *Notes toward a Definition of Culture*. Beyond, it can be witnessed in Lyotard when he speaks of “[e]clecticism [being] the degree zero of contemporary general culture: you listen to reggae, you watch a western, you eat McDonald’s at midday and local cuisine at night, you wear Paris perfume in Tokyo and dress retro in Hong Kong, knowledge is the stuff of TV game shows”; it is also apparent in a good number of the texts of Baudrillard<sup>14</sup>. Enzensberger’s reaction to all that, though he doesn’t cite any of it directly, is robust: “It is a foolish enterprise to fight against social affluence with Sunday speeches.”<sup>15</sup> For

<sup>11</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 175.

<sup>12</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 176.

<sup>14</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, “Answer to the question: what is the Postmodern?” in *The Postmodern Explained to Children*, trans. Don Barry, Bernadette Maher, Julian Pefanis, Virginia Spate, Morgan Thomas (London: Turnaround, 1992), 17.

<sup>15</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 176.

he does suspect, in the end, the reflex that laments the present (as postmodernists are liable to do) and equates it self-evidently with the mediocre. After all, this is a mediocrity wherein “generally no elites exist in the Federal Republic of Germany”<sup>16</sup> – how can that be bad? Especially when

Stoic and Epicurean philosophy stood by the middling degree – a conception which was accepted up to the Enlightenment. (The expression *juste milieu* was coined by Voltaire; it was meant altogether positively.) For the classic thinkers of Christian theology too, moderation always counted as a cardinal virtue, and they could appeal to Plato in that respect.<sup>17</sup>

This does not lead to the effects of “Dulness” (as Pope might have anticipated with the blandishments of the goddess who presides over the *Dunciad*), but rather to the leavening of “the average exoticism of everyday life”<sup>18</sup>. That occurs because “the mediocrity which dominates this republic is dominated by a maximum of variation and differentiation”, unaffected by “the idealization of old bourgeois milieu or ... the wistful remembrance of proletarian culture”<sup>19</sup>. What Baudrillard might see as simulacra’s effects and Jameson as commodification and depthlessness, Enzensberger perceives otherwise:

It’s rather the other way round: the kaleidoscopic succession of fashions and movements, interests and obsessions, hobbies and therapies, cults and catastrophes, manias and marketing gaps, sects, crises, trends and trips attach themselves to already-existing needs, suffering and desires. It’s in the nature of the thing, that whatever swarms there is higgledy-piggledy remains under the aegis of the mediocre.<sup>20</sup>

Mediocrity of this kind is irresistible. It is served by “pure cultures of triumphant mediocrity”, able to appreciate that the secret is the allaying of sameness even while – and this is ironic – this becomes the age of “the average deviationist, who no longer stands out at all from millions like him”<sup>21</sup>. And in the midst of all that, of this levelling, the secret is deeper again, for it all depends on the “Federal Republic” being “both average and a leader”, whereby “German society ... realizes a logical paradox: exaggerated mediocrity, hyperbolic mediocrity”. For this mediocrity, in a further twist, is “a *highly qualified* mediocrity”<sup>22</sup>. Accreditation, it seems, does not dispel mediocrity – but it can make it somehow less deleterious.

Enzensberger is however aware that this mediocrity is not for everyone. There is a “minority” (presumably kin to the contributors to this special issue) that will tend to “not want to allow itself to be domesticated and ascribes roles to itself which promise ways out of the constraints of averageness”<sup>23</sup>. In the end, Enzensberger’s sympathy does

<sup>16</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 177.

<sup>17</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 176.

<sup>18</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 179.

<sup>19</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 178.

<sup>20</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 178.

<sup>21</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 179.

<sup>22</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 180, emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 182.

lie with that minority, it seems, as he suggests that “a thousand symposia and evening classes” study, now, the culture of the mediocre, making “mediocrity with all its fantastic learning capacity all the more invulnerable”<sup>24</sup>. It is why “the leading role of the genius is more and more difficult to fill”, so that “[i]nto his place steps the star, who can supply professional, and that means mediocre, goods in large series”<sup>25</sup>. Yet this resultant “Republic of Mediocrity”, pervasive and triumphant though it is, “strangely satisfied and madly normal”, is “not at ease with itself”<sup>26</sup>, Enzensberger concludes. Instead it is nagged by the sense of “loss of reality” and “molecular madness”<sup>27</sup>.

What can we take from this? Quite a lot, potentially, not least that “the pandemic domination of mediocrity”<sup>28</sup> of the Federal Republic as it was then has extended itself and continued to be a model – mediocrity as example, ironically – for that beleaguered Europe which a unified Germany, not quite at ease with itself, is increasingly pressured to bail out. Enzensberger shows that it can be too easy to bemoan the mediocre, that this is an academic reflex blind to the imperviousness of the larger population to this apotheosis of the average. In the new professionalized mediocrity the public, “far from suffering under it, values its virtues and pleasures”<sup>29</sup>. We can bear being reminded – particularly in a Europe that is increasingly the *nouveau pauvre* of the world – that mediocrity of this kind is a sort of emancipation. If this is what mediocrity at work can configure, then it would be misplaced to either jest about it or decry it. Mediocrity, when it is like this, *is* what the people want. Even if – or *because* – just where it seems to triumph without restrictions, where it is at its most self-satisfied, mediocrity in turn takes on features of delusion”<sup>30</sup>. Indeed: the project of Enlightenment, of modernity, ends in mediocrity and delusion. Or, at best, in “Lufthansa or Mercedes patriotism”<sup>31</sup>. And yet again, it bears remembering, this is what people around the world look to and envy, want a part of, migrate to. They regard it as exceptional, exemplary and *counter* to the mediocre.

Even so, and despite his realization that there are compensations in it, Enzensberger is no apologist for the mediocre. There are ample indications elsewhere in *Mediocrity and Delusion* of his understanding of the effects of mediocrity’s neutralization of the distinctive, the critical, the *lettered*. He speaks of literature having “lost weight”, its “academic fortresses ... encircled only by a dull tolerance”<sup>32</sup>. It is an idea followed up in another essay where, anticipating Derrida, he remarks that literature is “allowed to do everything, but nothing depends on it any more”<sup>33</sup>. This makes life quite comfortable for “the secondary illiterate”, and if I quote the description of that figure in full here it is because it seems to depict the very image of the mediocre person as we might view him or her today: the one who is apt to make us expostulate and

<sup>24</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 184.

<sup>25</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 184.

<sup>26</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 188.

<sup>27</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 187.

<sup>28</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 187.

<sup>29</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 176.

<sup>30</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 187.

<sup>31</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 180.

<sup>32</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 23-24.

<sup>33</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 29. Compare the following thought: “For literature can say anything, accept anything, receive anything, suffer anything, and simulate everything ...” – Jacques Derrida, “Demeure,” in Maurice Blanchot/Jacques Derrida, *The Instant of My Death/Demeure: Fiction and Testimony*, trans. Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 29.



splutter and who seems so much better adapted to the world than those who would (be)rate him:

The secondary illiterate is lucky; his loss of memory causes him no suffering; if he does not have a mind of his own, then that relieves the pressure on him; he values the inability to concentrate on anything; he considers it an advantage that he does not know and does not understand what is happening to him. He is active. He is adaptable. He displays considerable determination in getting his own way. So we do not need to worry about him. The fact that the secondary illiterate has no idea that he is a secondary illiterate contributes to his well-being. He considers himself to be well informed, can decode instructions, pictograms and cheques, and moves in a world which seals him off from every challenge to his confidence. It is unthinkable that he should be frustrated by his surroundings. They, after all, gave birth to him and formed him in order to guarantee their own trouble-free survival.<sup>34</sup>

Thus, and more, the mediocre. Clearly, this kind of mediocre individual can get through life very well indeed. It would be delusive to think otherwise. This goes beyond jest, for here is a mediocrity very avidly at work: “It will usually be the case that secondary illiterates occupy the top positions in politics and business”<sup>35</sup>. The effect on culture is damaging, and not only because of signs that “the population will break up into increasingly distinct cultural castes”<sup>36</sup>. Arnold, who we remember looking to Germany as an example of how things might be different and better when holding forth to his countrymen about culture as he saw it in his time, would have been dismayed to see that for Enzensberger culture in the Federal Republic “is in a completely new situation”, where

[t]he claim to universal validity, which it always raised but never met, can be forgotten. ...The consequence is that it no longer has to serve any ruling interest. Culture does not legitimate anything any more. ... Such a culture must rely on its own resources, and the sooner it understands that the better.<sup>37</sup>

This prompts a number of insights. For instance, for those worried about mediocrity in the university (and there is lots of that worry in the pages of this special issue), it permits the realization that what Benjamin Ginsberg recently referred to as the rise of the “deanlet” as a concomitant to “the fall of the faculty” was prefigured in the figure of the secondary illiterate, now firmly embedded within the neoliberal model of higher education as both its administrator and, worse, its ideal recipient<sup>38</sup>. It also means that those who have “culture”, who are presumably not mediocre, who can recognize in a newspaper like *Bild Zeitung* “the abolition of reading as reading”<sup>39</sup> and television as “the zero medium [and] the only universal and widely distributed form of psychotherapy”<sup>40</sup>, will forever be in a minority. This is, in fact, in keeping with

<sup>34</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 41.

<sup>35</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 44.

<sup>36</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> See Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 43.

<sup>40</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 69.

“Literature ... again becom[ing] what it was from the beginning: a minority concern”. And like all minorities, those who profess literature and culture will be least prepossessing when they carp. *Especially* when they carp about the mediocre – unless, of course, they do it in jest or, at any rate, with charm.

Enzensberger’s contribution to this entire scene, in fact, is to understand precisely that. Admittedly, his book may not be the most high-profile contribution to analysis of the mediocre, but it is not any the less significant for that. To overlook it, in fact, would be quite mediocre. What Enzensberger does is to demonstrate how to gently yet effectively expose the mediocre. He does not lament or bemoan too stridently, even when he sees through things most clearly. He certainly does not expostulate or splutter. His tone suggests the weary resignation mentioned at the start of this essay. He realizes that a mild tone of jest about that which he exposes and about the indignation it might occasion is just the way to approach the mediocre, especially since it *is* our landscape *and* horizon now. If the Federal Republic of Germany as it was then and – by projection and especially in a Europe that has since grown poorer all round – Germany as it is now provide the models for that which is most generally aspired to – “the uncontested hegemony”<sup>41</sup> in which “[t]he mediocre which dominates this republic is characterized by a maximum of variation and differentiation”<sup>42</sup> – then it is perhaps entirely fitting that his text should not be a jeremiad. For to berate this mediocrity would be to regret what humanity, in the drift of its collective desires – in the play of Girardian desire, one could say – has now become. Mediocrity at work, at least of this kind, is what we covet. It *works*. In jest, to take the edge off things: we must love these Germans, for this is what we have become. “Everyone is German now” – or would like to be, you could say.

And yet, and yet. True: to bemoan all that is synonymous with misanthropy. True, too, that Enzensberger is valuable because he instructs his reader in unexpected and genuine compassion toward the mediocre and their desires. And true, above all, that his aperçus in the end reaffirm the antithesis of the mediocre. Note how cannily this particular argument which I reproduce in these next lines moves, for instance. At one stage Enzensberger ingeniously observes that “it was the illiterate who invented literature. Its elementary forms, from the myth to the nursery rhyme, from the fairy tale to the song, from the prayer to the riddle, are all older than writing. Without oral transmission there would be no poetry and without the illiterate no books”<sup>43</sup>. And then, after remarking that “the illiterate now appears to me to be an admirable figure”, enviable “for his memory, his ability to concentrate, his cunning, his inventiveness, his tenacity and his acute sense of hearing”<sup>44</sup>, Enzensberger deftly connects the threads of his argument – including the idea of literature as a minority interest – as follows:

Literature will keep on proliferating, as long as it retains a degree of tenacity, a degree of cunning, the ability to concentrate, a degree of obstinacy and a good memory. You will remember that these are the very attributes of the true illiterate. Perhaps he will have the last word. For he needs no other medium than voice and ear.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 174.

<sup>42</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 178.

<sup>43</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 36.

<sup>45</sup> Enzensberger, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, 45.

This is pleasing, for it puts the mediocre – or secondary illiterate – in his place: that is, in sharp contrast to the lettered and the true illiterate. But what it also prompts in our minds is a critical question. What if the secondary illiterate professes himself a *writer*? This, as we know, is worrying, because that figure becomes the trope characterizing all those who are mediocre and try to get ahead of themselves. That is why the *Dunciad* – which we can think of here as a *Mediocriad*, as it were – is such a powerful poem. It illustrates what happens when the mediocre are not content to simply be or to beaver away at being, in Enzensberger's sense, German, but instead confuse their ineptitude with aptitude. The problem with the mediocre, we realize from this, occurs not because the mediocre exist or teem, but because they are apt to behave grubbily or, in Pope's words, in a manner reminiscent of the hack who "Next o'er his books his eyes begin to roll, / In pleasing memory of all he stole; / How here he sipp'd, how there he plunder'd snug, / And suck'd all o'er like an industrious bug" (I, ll. 166-30)<sup>46</sup>. This can lead to a different republic of the mediocre to Enzensberger's federalized Germany: one when the purloining of the excellent and the plundering of the distinctive can carry on with impunity and even to acclaim. In that respect the famous closing image of the *Dunciad*, in which "Universal Darkness buries All" (IV, l. 656)<sup>47</sup> in an envisioning of the implosion of the entire world, becomes the master trope for those driven insensible by their haplessness before mediocre environments. Mediocrity, there, is at work a little too seriously. There is jest in Pope's exposure, admittedly, but perhaps we recognize real mediocrity when the digs it prompts are not benevolent but productive of a humour that can only be caustic. There will always be good reasons, after all, why not everybody can be as ultimately charitable toward the mediocre as Enzensberger. Again, readers will at this point doubtless wish in their minds to adduce their own reasons. They are, surely, strong, and the accordingly strong feelings in reaction to the mediocre are also indubitably justified.

What, however, of the ethical dimension. What of alterity, *when the other is mediocre*? There are two points that I would like to make here about that. The first takes us back to *Middlemarch* (1871-72). George Eliot's title, with its implication of the march of the middling to the middling – a suggestion reinforced further by the effect of the subtitle "A Study of Provincial Life" – already suggests a deadening effect. The novel is surgical in its examination of hopes and desires gone stale and of what that does to the mind and to the individual's perception of himself and the relation to community. Of course, that is very much the theme of so much of modern and contemporary fiction. But the difference is that in Eliot the theme is explored with all the compassion that the nineteenth-century novel is capable of mustering in relation to the human and to that figure which criticism was once pleased to call *l'homme moyen sensuel*. What, indeed, happened to him, that man of reasonable sensibility: the supreme reference point for appropriateness and moderation in the positioning of one's own conduct and understanding? No doubt *l'homme moyen sensuel* was very precisely decorous about his own mediocrity. He probably lived out his middling existence in an unobjectionable and temperate way and in a manner inoffensive to those who, more distinguished, conferred upon him the phrase that designates him and who projected upon him the attributes that could best act as a foil to their own exceptionality. But later literature is full of what

<sup>46</sup> Alexander Pope, "The Dunciad," in *The Poems of Alexander Pope*, ed. John Butt (London and New York: Routledge, 1963), 726.

<sup>47</sup> Pope, "The Dunciad", 800.

happens when *l'homme moyen sensuel* gets ideas about himself and about what is due to him and what can be expected of life, and the tone of all that can be quite unpleasant, unforgiving and punitive. Remember, for instance, Musil's way with Ulrich in *The Man without Qualities* (1930-42), or James Joyce's intuition in *Ulysses* (1922) that the literary temper and the *Zeitgeist* would now be more amenable to a contemporary odyssey being navigable by a mediocre protagonist like Leopold Bloom rather than a resourceful hero, or the abasement and abjection endured by the anti-heroes of the Angry Young Men. The tone is not necessarily any less stern in George Eliot – one need only recall the precision of the charting of the downfall of Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, who “meant to be a unit who would make a certain amount of difference towards that spreading change which would one day tell appreciably upon the averages”<sup>48</sup> – but it tends to be surrounded by an appreciation that the world, like humanity, will be what it is, such that some tenderness toward those who imperceptibly but inexorably become aware of their foreshortened horizons might not be amiss<sup>49</sup>. The following passage, from *Middlemarch*, illustrates this:

For in the multitude of middle-aged men who go about their vocations in a daily course determined for them much in the same way as the tie of their cravats, there is always a good number who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little. The story of their coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross, is hardly ever told even in their consciousness; for perhaps their ardor in generous unpaid toil cooled as imperceptibly as the ardor of other youthful loves, till one day their earlier self walked like a ghost in its old home and made the new furniture ghastly. Nothing in the world more subtle than the process of their gradual change! In the beginning they inhaled it unknowingly: you and I may have sent some of our breath towards infecting them, when we uttered our conforming falsities or drew our silly conclusions: or perhaps it came with the vibrations from a woman's glance<sup>50</sup>.

There is much to ponder in that passage in relation to the mediocre, not least the understanding that nobody ever set off aspiring to be average (not, at least, unless one goes with Enzensberger's depiction of the average mediocre German). The contraction of ardour and aspiration, and the contagion of the normal breathed upon the average by those – “you and I” – presuming upon the mediocre through assuming their own higher calling and higher gaze, which were probably “falsities” and “silly” anyway, is understood here to be both developmental and relational. Indeed: the mediocre will always be with us. *And* indeed this might be *your* story and probably – *by the very law of averages* upon which Lydgate would have wanted to feel he had acted – the passage suggests that it *is*. That final reference to “a woman's glance” irresistibly recalls Larkin, too – that laureate of the humdrum – concluding in “An Arundel Tomb” (but not very hopefully in the poem's context of “stone fidelity”) that “What will survive of us is love”<sup>51</sup>. Immediately thereafter in this trail of poetic association W. H. Auden's line in “September 1, 1939” can be recalled: “We must love one another or die”<sup>52</sup>. And yet, and precisely – how can one love the mediocre, when one knows it to be so? Indeed, how to love oneself or respect oneself, when one knows oneself mediocre?

<sup>48</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), 175, emphasis added.

<sup>49</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch* 173-174.

<sup>50</sup> Eliot, *Middlemarch*, 173-174.

<sup>51</sup> Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 110-111.

<sup>52</sup> W. H. Auden, *Selected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 88.

That is too large a question to answer here. But it leads me to my second point. The test of that love is when the object is mediocre not in a middling way, but abjectly so. Indeed, let me drop this line on love, for fear that it will come across as fanciful, and assert the question differently. Let me, even, spell it out. How is one to relate to mediocre individuals who through their behaviour and performance might tend to be distracting, infuriating, utterly inept yet pretentious with it, and – to quote what is overheard when they are mentioned – “a waste of time and space”. We might all have been overheard crossly having that conversation on the mediocre, and perhaps there is nothing we fear more in our professional lives than to be the subject of it, overhearing it when we are, so that we end up shrinking away and shrinking into ourselves. Here, then by way of drawing this essay to a close, are a few quick responses to that imponderable.

(i) The Call for Papers for this special issue of *Word and Text* fielded an interesting parting shot. “One last caveat: this is not an issue on performativity, so mediocre people, even if ‘you do not know who you are’, need not apply...”. A little bit risqué, perhaps, in its jest about the mediocre and about not wanting to see mediocrity at work. Not, necessarily, very nice either – but then wit isn’t, necessarily, particularly when it hits home, as the dunces stung by Pope would have known. And the caveat is in any case strangely fitting and wholly appropriate, for it stages and acts out (despite its disclaimer on performativity) the very dilemma that faces those who find themselves disinclined to indulge the mediocre: namely, how to circumscribe the sphere of influence of the mediocre without opening oneself up, as seen earlier, to the *tu quoque* retort and the judgment that the retort might be justified, *but* also the obligation to exercise discernment in a manner that is responsible to some overriding principle of quality that will vindicate and thereby redeem any unpleasantness that might be caused by ascriptions of mediocrity. In other words, this forces home the realization, which is never very comfortable if one wants to be “peaceable” (that key term in Julian Barnes’s *The Sense of an Ending*, where the peaceable and the mediocre are implicitly equated<sup>53</sup>), that when the non-mediocre (assuming an objective process of their identification is possible and completed) do not, in fact, identify the mediocre for what it is, an important *political* duty has been abdicated. In other words, before the political and ethical questions of how to deal with the mediocre are to be addressed, the prior responsibility to interpellate the mediocre as such needs to be fulfilled. That gesture, it is to be admitted, will not be very nice either – but it may not be avoidable.

(ii) There comes a juncture where one realizes that the only important question about the mediocre is why it should exist at all. But as that is ultimately a question on humanity and the human condition it becomes obvious that one should step back, remembering rather Arendt’s understanding that when mediocrity became banalized in the name of exceptionality and electiveness to the point of political supremacy it misidentified the mediocre and proceeded to eliminate it. Whereupon one could conclude that one might as well, then, not attempt to interpellate the mediocre as such at all, for to do so is to risk perverting horribly the responsibility indicated in the first response above. In other words: do not move on mediocrity, for that gesture is always ethically fraught. Undoubtedly – but let us see what Arendt herself says about that.

<sup>53</sup> See particularly the following exchange:

‘You’re quite cowardly, aren’t you, Tony?’

‘I think it’s more that I am ... peaceable.’

‘Well, I wouldn’t want to disturb your self-image.’

Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 35.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt remarks:

History is full of examples of the impotence of the strong and superior man who does not know how to enlist the help, the co-acting of his fellow men. His failure is frequently blamed upon the fatal inferiority of the many and the resentment every outstanding person inspires in those who are mediocre. Yet true as such observations are bound to be, they do not touch the heart of the matter<sup>54</sup>.

The heart of the matter which Arendt alludes to is, perhaps, precisely the question that has been bothering this essay from the start. What *is* to be done about the mediocre among us? How can they be encountered equitably, with a sense that the political justice owed to them does not obtrude on the political justice that is owed closer to home? Arendt's immediate answer – I shall not trace it out in detail or reproduce its philological rigour, balanced on a consideration of the significance of “the two Greek verbs *archein* (‘to begin,’ ‘to lead,’ finally ‘to rule’) and *prattein* (‘to pass through,’ ‘to achieve,’ ‘to finish’)” and their correspondence to Latin *agere* and *gerere*, respectively – is to indicate that there always was “an original interdependence of action, the dependence of the beginner and leader upon others for help and the dependence of his followers upon him for an occasion to act themselves”<sup>55</sup>. In other words, those who are not mediocre need those who are mediocre, just as much as they themselves are needed by the latter. Mediocrity, in other words, is not a relation of *opposition*, but a relation of *dependence*. That is, of course, is one is willing to make the politics of the mediocre one in which the mediocre can understand themselves and be understood to be average and therefore able to work reciprocally across “two altogether different functions: the function of giving commands, which became the prerogative of the ruler, and the function of executing them, which became the duty of his subjects”<sup>56</sup>. This is not some roundabout way of bringing back a later version of a Great Chain of Being, with everyone slotted into their allotted sphere. That would not be, politically, very good at all. But it is already better than the idea that the mediocre are to be, at best, sidelined, for the acceptance that they – *we* – are integral and indispensable to *prattein*, to *gerere*, is the one on which the principles of the rationale for their – *our* – emancipation, education, betterment, empowerment can be built. And as if to pre-echo Enzensberger's title, *Mediocrity and Delusion*, the delusion is cast, in fact, on the side of the supposedly non-mediocre: “[T]he ruler monopolizes, so to speak, the strength of those without whose help he would never be able to achieve anything. Thus, the delusion of extraordinary strength arises and with it the fallacy of the strong man who is powerful because he is alone”<sup>57</sup>. The moral of the story seems to be: keep the mediocre close, valuing what they *can* do.

(iii) That leads to the third point, which seems to suggest the opposite. The mediocre *cannot* be allowed to be mediocre. Their mediocrity must be “improved” (that word again). This is not to say, of course, that they must be collectivized to some pragmatic, totalizing purpose. Peter Mayo's reflections in his interview in these pages on the vitality of Adult Education programmes and their elevation of those who find

<sup>54</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). 189.

<sup>55</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189.

<sup>56</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 189.

<sup>57</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 190.

themselves to be average or worse are eloquent enough on what needs to be done there, and why it is just that it should occur, especially in circumstances where the mediocre have been failed time and again. One can only endorse all that. At the same time, the overwhelming conclusion is that any programme for mediocrity must involve getting those we call “mediocre” to be at least middling rather than lost to disaffiliation in regard to the discerning of distinction (that, at least, one is not unethically entitled to expect). For if mediocrity can put itself to work to recognize its opposite the outcome can be quite something. It would be possible to class that outcome – to recall the idiom of the “all-administrative university” without the least jest or any heavy or concessive irony at all – as *impact*, indeed.

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A coda. Here is Arendt on a very specific curse endured by those who are *not* mediocre. There is no other way but to quote *The Human Condition* at length here.

It is not the glory but the predicament of the creative genius that in his case the superiority of man to his work seems indeed inverted, so that he, the living creator, finds himself in competition with his creations which he outlives, although they may survive him eventually. The saving grace of all really great gifts is that the persons who bear their burden remain superior to what they have done, at least as long as the source of creativity is alive; for this source springs indeed from *who* they are and remains outside the actual work process as well as independent of *what* they may achieve. That the predicament of genius is nevertheless a real one becomes quite apparent in the case of the *literati*, where the inverted order between man and his product is in fact consummated; what is so outrageous in their case, and incidentally incites popular hatred even more than spurious intellectual superiority, is that even their worst product is likely to be better than they are themselves. It is the hallmark of the “intellectual” that he remains quite undisturbed by the “terrible humiliation” under which the true artist or writer labors, which is “to feel that he becomes the son of his work,” in which he is condemned to see himself “as in a mirror, limited, such and such.”<sup>58</sup>

The quotations are from Valéry and follow on from Arendt’s acknowledgment of “Isak Dinesen’s wonderful story ‘The Dreamers’”, which states that “the great people themselves are judged by who they are”<sup>59</sup>. Great, then, is as great *is*, not as greatness *does*. Mediocre too, then, must be as mediocre *is*, not as mediocrity *does*. The worrisome conclusion is that mediocrity might not then be saved from itself, whatever our politics. It can be inferred once more, therefore, that mediocrity will always be with us.

A further observation. It is curious that here, as in Enzensberger’s *Mediocrity and Delusion*, literature – or at any rate those who profess it, as “*literati*” – provides the exceptional instance to the conventional dynamics with the mediocre. In the end, Arendt suggests, the most sobering, cutting, devastating mediocrity is that of the intellectual or artist who is unable to see that in the work for which he labours he is reflected as very far from measuring up, and is in fact shown up as being mediocre by the very greatness that he creates. No greater mediocrity then, than that within those who give birth to greatness but fall short of realizing that they themselves fall short of it, especially when

<sup>58</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 211-212.

<sup>59</sup> See Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 211-222.

they are most prone to think that there is a coextensiveness between the quality of their work, the quality of the outcome of their efforts and the quality of their person. The greater the work, ironically, the more cruel the contrast and the judgement. There is no greater jest played *on* the mediocre or *by* it than this one, where it is mediocrity at work – the work of mediocrity – that creates the space of greatness in which the jest of mediocrity's non-recognition of itself is most devastatingly staged. Mediocrity at work and in jest: quite, and the joke is on the ablest of us all.

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## Mediocritatea, la lucru și în glumă

Plecând de la diverse contexte în care mediocritatea are înțelesul de „medie” sau, prin contrast, „mai jos de medie”, acest articol ia în discuție câteva aspecte referitoare la provocări de ordin etic și politic care demonstrează că mediocritatea există, destul de simplu și independent de definiția sa. Printre aceste provocări se numără dificultățile de a face distincția între rafinamentul și mediocritatea proprie sau a altuia sau atunci când ne confruntăm cu problema acceptării mediocrității altora. Natura acestor provocări este explorată prin intermediul textelor lui Alexander Pope, George Eliot și Hannah Arendt, cu referințe la volumul *Mediocritate și iluzie* a lui Hans Magnus Enzensberger, care joacă un rol important în analiza mediocrității din această analiză. Concluziile reprezintă o serie de reflecții despre afinitățile stranie dintre mediocritate și opușii acesteia.